



# Supporting Victims of Domestic Violence during the COVID-19 Pandemic

*Educate Yourself. Stay Informed. Be Safe.*

Victims of domestic violence may face an increase in violence and greater barriers to accessing help as stay-at-home orders force them to spend more time with their abuser and physical distancing orders isolate them from support. It is common for victims of domestic violence to also be victims of sexual assault, stalking, and strangulation, as these crimes are co-occurring and interconnected and reflect some tactics that abusers use to maintain power and control.

To reach and support vulnerable victims of domestic violence who are at increased risks during the COVID-19 pandemic, law enforcement agencies should:

**Be Aware of Escalated Abuse** to victims due to the suspect and victim being in close quarters for an extended period due to physical distancing measures and the resulting reduction in activities outside the home. Additionally, the increase in firearms and ammunition sales at the outset of the pandemic in the United States and Canada can create an escalated risk to both the victim and responding officer(s).

**Keep Staff Informed** of the increased risks that victims may face due to COVID-19. Maintain agency response and outreach to victims of crime and ensure that agency members can provide accurate, up-to-date information, guidance, and resources to victims. This includes reiterating that agency policy is to continue arresting for domestic violence and related charges. Agency employees should also be aware of changes in the availability of support services, changes in guidance on emergency department visits for victim injuries, and changes to court processes and protection order filings and hearings.

Consider sharing resources such as the **Battered Women's Justice Project's [Coercive Control during COVID-19: New Tactics](#) training video with officers during roll call.**

**Enforce and Oversee Agency Policies** to ensure officers understand how they are expected to respond to nonviolent and violent crimes of domestic violence, sexual assault, stalking, and strangulation. Leadership should work to maintain regular agency response to these crimes, including thorough investigations and consideration of co-occurring crimes like child abuse, elder abuse, and animal abuse, while following additional COVID-19 safety precautions.

**Provide Consistent Messaging** about supporting victims of crime through all available communication channels to help agencies maintain trust and inform the community and victims of available resources. Victims may have limited access to communication channels if abusers control their access to internet, cell phone, friends, and family. Expanding outreach through nontraditional routes to make victims aware of their options for community-based resources can help to fill this gap. For example, consider:

- including resource lists in food bank boxes that are distributed in the community.
- posting public information notices at grocery stores, pharmacies, and other public places.
- educating the public through social media or public service announcements (PSA) on the resources and social services available, one example is this [NOBLE Domestic Violence PSA](#), a 30-second video from the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE).

**Work in Partnership** with criminal justice and community partners to ensure your community knows partners are still working to support victims and hold offenders accountable. Consider regular calls or virtual meetings and a joint news release with multidisciplinary partners to make it clear that all stand together and ready, despite the inherent difficulties of a global pandemic.

**Adapt Technology** to facilitate investigations, protection order hearings, and court proceedings, as many jurisdictions are doing during COVID-19. While providing access through digital platforms is important, it is equally important that these platforms protect the privacy of victims and are compliant with federal and local laws, as well as grant funding requirements for the agencies and organizations using them, which may include HIPAA, Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), and Victims of Crime Act (VOCA) requirements. Consult your agency's legal advisor for further considerations.



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**Prepare for Increases in Reporting** as shelter-in-place orders are lifted and businesses and courts resume in-person practices. Police and service providers may experience a surge in victims reporting crimes and accessing services. Police should be prepared to respond fully (for example, police should have PPE with them should they need to enter an individual's home). Agencies should also consult and coordinate with criminal justice stakeholders including prosecutors and court personnel to help ensure cases are processed effectively.

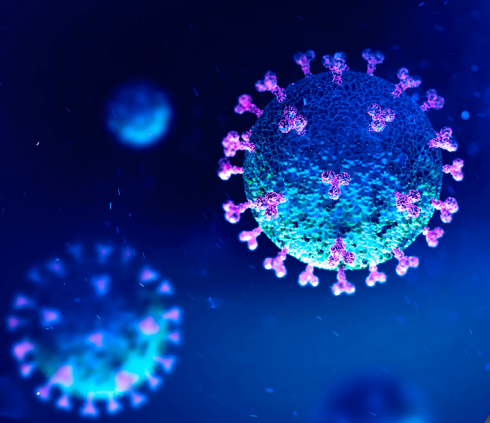
## **Be aware of the effects of COVID-19 on victims, abusers, and abuse:**

- **Isolation:** With physical distancing, sheltering-in-place, and businesses closed or having employees work from home, many victims are rarely leaving their homes or seeing friends/family. Abusers may use COVID-19 as an excuse to further restrict victims' movements, controlling where they go and when. This means victims have fewer opportunities to be alone and call family, friends, or hotlines for support. Abusers may also try to use COVID-19 as an excuse to keep officers away and out of the house, deny access to victims and witnesses, etc. Officers should still proceed and not be deterred but should ensure proper PPE is utilized according to agency policy and public health recommendations.
- **Access to Housing:** Abusers are leveraging physical distancing and fears of COVID-19 to control victims. Support services report that abusers are weaponizing COVID-19 by refusing to allow victims to leave their homes, threatening to kick the victim out if they get sick, or threatening to kick them out so they do get sick. Victims may also be reluctant to go to shelters out of fear of getting COVID-19.
- **Access to Cleaning and Sanitizing Products:** National hotlines are reporting that abusers are controlling access to soap and cleaning supplies or are using it as another form of physical abuse by forcing victims to wash their hands until they are raw and bloody.
- **Access to Medication:** Abusers may withhold victims' medications or access to medical care to make them more susceptible to serious illness from COVID-19.

- **Income:** Victims may have lost income due to COVID-19 and have limited or no economic independence, preventing them from leaving unsafe environments. Lost income for the family may escalate financial stress and become a tool of abuse/power/control.
- **Technology Abuse:** With physical distancing requiring many to stay in one place and heavily rely on technology, victims are at an elevated risk of technology abuse. Abusers often control and track victims' phones and computers and may control online interactions to limit victims' access to the outside world and information. Abusers can also access smart devices and manipulate victims' homes from anywhere.
- **Parenting and Children:** With many schools and childcare centers closed, children become another tool for abusers over which to exert power and control. Children then become more vulnerable to witnessing domestic violence and experiencing child abuse.

## **Be aware of the effects of COVID-19 on support services, courts, and jail protocols:**

- **Community Resources:** Agency administration should stay connected with shelters and service providers to provide the most up-to-date information about changes in capacity and access and should share this information with officers. Housing and resource options will be strained during this time, suspension of public transportation services may impact safety plans, and food banks may not be a stable food option. Explore additional opportunities for partnerships through the hospitality and transportation industries to increase access to resources for victims.
- **Protection Orders:** The process to obtain a protective order may have changed, and courts may have extended all temporary/emergency protective orders. Agencies should communicate with local courts about any changes in protocol and explain changes directly to victims and victim advocates.



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- **Jail Protocols:** Many jails are adjusting their protocols to reduce their detained population to limit the spread of COVID-19. While people who have committed violent offenses are largely still being held, victims should be notified if their abuser is not going to be held or is only going to be held for a short period of time so that they can adjust their safety plan.

For more information on domestic violence and the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Visit IACP's list of resources: [Law Enforcement Response to Domestic and Sexual Violence and COVID-19](#)
- Watch the Battered Women's Justice Project's [Coercive Control during COVID-19: New Tactics training video](#) and review the [COVID-19 Power and Control Wheels](#).
- Review the [resource list](#) from Futures Without Violence to help agencies, service providers, and victims to stay informed and stay safe.

## LOCAL RESOURCES

### Advocacy Services

Contact

Modification of Services

### Shelters

Contact

Modification of Services

### Protection Orders

Contact

Modification of Services

### Emergency Department

Contact

Modification of Services

## NATIONAL RESOURCES FOR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE VICTIMS

If local service providers are forced to limit or suspend operations due to COVID-19, national hotlines can be shared with the community in the United States. Agencies from other countries should work with their community partners to advertise appropriate hotlines and resources.

The [National Domestic Violence Hotline](#) is 24/7, confidential, and free: **1-800-799-7233** and through [chat](#).

[RAINN \(Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network\)](#) has a website with resources and information for survivors and their friends/family as well as a hotline and chat feature that are 24/7, confidential, and free: **1-800-656-4673** and through [chat](#).

The [StrongHearts Native Helpline](#) for domestic/sexual violence is available 7am-10pm CT, confidential, and specifically for Native communities: **1-844-762-8483**.

The [Trans LifeLine](#) for peer support for trans folks 9am-3am CT: **1-877-565-8860**.

### Forensic Nurses

Contact

Modification of Services

### Food Bank

Contact

Modification of Services

### Other Local Resources